

RE-VISUALIZE THE VISUAL



Exploring visual arts with high-school students
in art museum and beyond

Myrto Theocharidou

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Olga Christoforou / o_olga_o

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AUTHOR: Myrto Theocharidou

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Department of Art, Design and
Architecture

Aalto University, Helsinki,
Finland

ADVISOR: Kaija Kaitavuori

SUPERVISOR: Tiina Pusa

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to achieve a better understanding of the engagement of high-school students with art museums and contemporary art. I worked on this project for 5 months with 7 inner-city adolescents from Cyprus, investigating their formal and informal museum visits and their understanding of contemporary art.

The study employed participatory action research methodology and visual research methods to investigate three questions: how high-school students experience visual arts inside, in relation to, and outside the institutions (school and museum); how these experiences inform the institutions on how to develop a sustained museum-student relationship; what action(s) does our research group suggest would make art museums more relevant to the visitors by taking into consideration their visit experiences.

An important conclusion of the project is that the proximity between the researcher and the participants, which was achieved through the participatory methodology, created a sense of community among the participants and promoted their active contribution to the research project. By framing contemporary art through the insights of high-school students and by drawing on their experiences and interactions in the contemporary art museum, the project also proposed an art game prototype which I designed with my research partners. Further, we examined the role of the school in relation to student museum habits.

Keywords: participatory research, contemporary art, art museum, high-school students, school, museum experience

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1. INTRODUCTION

People come and go and I stand here, by the artwork. I shift position every 45 minutes, while people continue to follow the exhibits' flow. Sometimes I break the silence by asking people politely to keep the distance from the 'unprotected treasure', to switch off the camera's flash, fold the selfie stick and sometimes to turn off the camera entirely.

Group educational visit. I am excited being outside the classroom and exploring the new environment. My excitement is disrupted though once I realize that the school-ish behavior and pressure comes up again, but this time from the one who explains the meaning of the artworks to us

*Behind the walls, in a small path of my thought, impregnated with my personal taste and expressed in visual form, an artwork is looking for an outside connection.
Can anybody understand it the same way I do?*

People come and go and I move with them, looking at the artworks. I move on to the next exhibit once I feel ready to do so. I reverently read the description text, I pretend that I have read and understood the concepts. Sometimes I break the rules by photographing, as a voyeur, an artwork that should not be photographed.

Group educational visit. I am excited being inside the museum and making people explore the new environment. The excitement is replaced by the pressure of keeping the balance between the master of knowledge and the mediator, the dialogue conductor.

I happen to be the visitor, the guard, the educator, the student, the art student, the researcher, the artist, the artwork.

1.1. MOTIVATION

My educational background in the Visual Arts (BA), the short employments and projects in different art museums, as well as my simple role as a museum visitor, have allowed me to acquire a multi-dimensional perspective on the arts. Viewing the visual arts and art museums through various ‘lenses’ and professions allowed me to understand the special impact of visual art in my life, and the potential of art museums to facilitate this experience. More precisely, what intrigues me most, is art’s communicative ability which is achieved through the aesthetic activity and competence, as also the potential of art museum to host this communication, between art and society.

Although I am passionate and convinced about the educational role of art museums, I often question if the museums are actually using this potential for a meaningful and sustained cultural spread, which highlights the interaction with or interference of the art, art-thinking, and different form of sensuousness in societal contexts (Christensen-Scheel, 2013). Likewise, I have often wondered whether schools - primarily educational institutions - introduce to students the social aspect of the arts through their art classes, or whether they merely restrict themselves to the teaching of still-life. Both my personal and professional experience in visual arts, art museums, and schools, has prompted me to investigate these questions/biases by seeking answers through the experiences and voices of others. Through the personal insights of people who are currently exposed to art and museum education I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the experiences which are emerging through these educational practices.

1.2. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research discusses the art and museum experiences of 15-and 16-year-old inner-city adolescents from Cyprus. I worked on this project for 5 months with 7 adolescents, investigating their formal and informal museum visits and their understanding of contemporary art, mainly through our group discussions.

My communication with the participants of the research group was framed by the methodology of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Due to PAR's "recursive process" (McIntyre, 2008) which questions, reflects upon and investigates a particular issue –in this case, the art and museum experiences of high-school students – we developed, implemented and refined an action plan – self-organized and autonomous art museums visits. Finally, we analyzed these visits and we made the second round of development, implementation, and refinement of an action plan -the design of a game prototype, based on our observations.

The empirical data presented in this thesis is a representative sample of the data elicited from the group's verbal, written and visual conversations. Moreover, it is the empirical data which I believe could be used to address my research questions since, it provides the greatest amount of insight into the phenomenon under investigation, namely, the art and museum experiences of high-school students.

Specifically, the study will be guided by the following research question(s):

1) How do high-school students experience visual arts inside, in relation to, and outside of the institutions (school and museum)?

And on a secondary level, the study seeks to address the following questions and comes to suggestive conclusions on:

2) How could these experiences inform the institutions (museum and school) in order to develop a sustained museum-student relationship?

3) What action(s) does our research group suggest to make art museums more relevant to the visitors by taking into consideration their visit experiences?

A constructivist perspective is adopted for the study. As such, the research “emphasizes constructed realities, interaction with participants, and rich description” (Mertens, 2014, p.44). Since the phenomenon under investigation extends across the disciplines of education, contemporary art, museum and visitor studies, an interdisciplinary approach was employed to inform the research.

1.3. FOR THE READER

1.3.1. MY POSITION IN THE RESEARCH

In relation to the ethical considerations of the PAR, which will be examined on the next chapter, it is vital to define my position in this research. Keeping the participatory balance between me and the 7 adolescents during the research process was a challenging task. Although I have used a method which requires equal participation among members, my role as the main conductor/practitioner of the research is often visible, and mainly in the beginning of the study. Furthermore, the written analysis of the empirical data of the research and the selection of the relevant bibliography and theory does not include any contribution from the adolescents. In contrast, the focus point of the research and the personal experiences presented in this thesis are limited to the age range of 15-16 years and on their experiences as students, and thus my contribution to the group discussions was more that of a listener/ discussion facilitator rather than of a speaker. The study is framed by the autonomous and self-originated museum visit of the research participants and based on their museum visit choices, contemporary art had become the central topic of our discussion.

The research project was not planned in detail beforehand but instead evolved organically and was based on the participants' input. It was important to trust and listen to the adolescents and give prominence to their voices rather than focus on my own personal opinions. In the study I use the term "co-researchers" or "research partners" since each participant, including myself, contributed equally. Specifically, the last part of the PAR, a game prototype which we have created as group, is a prime example of collaborative project development and evidence of the equal contribution of the research participants.

1.3.2. THE CHAPTERS

This study is organized into six chapters, which are not following the traditional research chapters structure (methodology – research data – data analysis – conclusion) but rather each chapter discuss a particular topic and juxtaposes empirical data, analysis, and conclusion.

The current chapter provides an overview of the research, addresses the significance of the study and its aim, and also the research questions.

The METHODOLOGY AND CASE chapter presents the Participatory Action Research methodology and also the other research methods which have been used in this research. The chapter also presents the research group, how communication between the research participants was conducted, and the role of social media in the conduction of the research.

The ART MUSEUM AND SCHOOL chapter discusses the important role the school plays in introducing art and the art museum to its students, as well as the art and museum education experiences of the research participants. Furthermore, it investigates the way the school integrates museum visits in its programme and how the museum as an institution is approached by this specific age group.

The CONTEMPORARY ART AND MUSEUM chapter focuses on the first self-organised museum visit of my co-researchers -outside of school or family activities-, and their encounter with contemporary art at NiMAC (Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre, Associated with the Pierides Foundation). Specifically, it discusses their experience in a contemporary art institution and how they frame the terms "art" and "contemporary art".

The ART INSIDE /IN RELATION TO/ OUTSIDE OF THE MUSEUM: A GAME PROTOTYPE chapter presents the practical outcome of this research, a prototype of a game/participatory photographic archive for art, which suggests a participatory engagement with visual arts inside, in relation to, and outside of the museum. The key elements which this chapter discusses, and which were also the inspiration for

the game design, are the photos taken during a museum visit and the interpretations of the viewed art. Both the photography and the interpretations were the actions of the museum visit of my co-researchers, which were not directed by the museum.

The last chapter, provides an overview of the study's findings and outcomes, including recommendations for potential developments of the PersonART Stories game. Most chapters start by introducing a text or a phrase, retrieved either from our group discussions or my personal diary, that addresses the relevant themes of the chapter.

2. METHODOLOGY & CASE

*Tension and excitement, again in front of the screen.
I met with my group, we met.
The tension has retreated, the excitement has bloomed.*

*Neutral and casual chat, again in front of the screen.
You met with your group, we met.
Neutral chatting became an active conversation and casual became playful.*

At least, this is how I had experienced it.

2.1. PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

If we draw a parallel between research and traveling, methodology could be the mode of transportation we choose to make the journey. One may choose to travel by airplane and have an observational role as a traveler. I, however, have chosen to travel on foot along with company, discuss and listen to my companions' stories.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) and other qualitative methodologies, which include discussion or narrative methods to gather the research data, can provide a deep understanding of individual's experiences and highlight unique qualities of each research participant (Everett & Barrett, 2009). Particularly, Participatory Action Research (PAR), as it is presented by Kemmis and McTaggartis (2008), "is a process of learning, with others, by doing—changing the ways in which we interact in a shared social world" (p.283).

In my case, I worked with seven adolescents from Cyprus with the aim to share, analyze and develop the art museum experiences. During the research project, different qualitative research methods were used in order to gather the data and reach the desirable result. As Shortall (2003) notes:

In theory, participatory action research can use diverse methods, both quantitative and qualitative, but in practice, it is primarily qualitative research methods that are used. Information is usually collected by participant observation, interviews, compilation of field notes and document analysis. In keeping with the commitment to value popular knowledge, vernacular, usually oral, traditions of communication and dissemination of knowledge are used. (p.3)

Additionally, other qualitative visual methodologies such as photo-elicitation and photo-documentation were part of this research.

2.2. COMPOSING THE RESEARCH GROUP

2.2.1. DEFINING THE TARGET GROUP

As aforementioned, the research project has a primarily qualitative and not quantitative base, and thus the choice of research group participants was a fundamental step of the research process. Theoretically, the research could be conducted by any target group since museums themselves host a wide range of visitors (in terms of age range, various financial/educational/cultural backgrounds, people with disabilities). However, in order to constitute the research group, it was necessary to refer to the research questions and its main elements, namely art education and the museum education. Thus, the research group should be related to art education, either as students of art education or as educators. The perspectives of art students and of art educators are equally important in a school's art education since together they synthesize the student-teacher educational model of the school.

I was particularly interested in collaborating with students, because as a future educator it would be a great opportunity to engage art critically from student's perspective. To select the members of my research group, I chose certain practical requirements for membership to limit the selection pool.

Language was one of these requirements. While the use of one's mother tongue as the main verbal communication tool between the researcher and the co-researchers/participants is not necessarily important, I consciously chose to work with Greek-speaking people in order to maximize the effectiveness and spontaneity of each encounter. One option was to search for Greek-speaking individuals in Finland and conduct the research project in Finnish museums. However, this could prove too time-consuming for a limited-time master thesis. Furthermore, the research's focus point – art education and museum experiences— does not require a specific location.

Thus, I decided to conduct the research in my homeland, the island of Cyprus. In Cyprus, where I was born and grew up, I already had a social network, and thus composing a research group would not be a

time-consuming process. Learning more about the current museum scene and art education in Cyprus, not only from an empirical perspective but also as a researcher, is necessary for my future plans of working in those sectors in Cyprus.

Another crucial choice I had to make was to determine the age range of the group, which could alter and redefine the thesis' process and focus point. Due to my previous working experience with specific age group - 6-10 years old - in two museums' educational programmes and my teaching experience in private art courses, I wanted to work with children aged 8-10 years old. Working with this age group would be ideal for my personal confidence. However, I realized that such a choice would interfere with my research demands. This was because this elementary school group would require the involvement of the parents, a strict schedule and the researcher having the role of guide. Consequently, I chose to approach a group with more independence and flexibility.

Other factors in my choice of the target group were the need for participants to be able to participate on an equal footing with me in the group's discussions, to be able to critically examine institutions such as museums and schools, and also participants who were ready to visit museums by their own -without parental or teacher supervision. An age range which fitted the above requirements was adolescence, and thus I decided to select adolescents for the research group.

My 15-year-old sister facilitated the process of finding participants by suggesting to invite her friends to join the research group. In this way the research sample became very specific, since we were dealing with participants of similar sociocultural and educational backgrounds.

Hence, the group would consist of adolescent teenagers between 15 and 16 years old. According to Falk and Dierking (2002), adolescence is the stage where the search for personal identity begins, and thus I believe it is a demanding and interesting age to work with. Additionally, youth in museums was a topic which I had already researched during my Master studies, as a student of the Museum Pedagogical course. Attracting teenagers and young adults to visit the museum was a real problem for the Atenum Art Museum

in Helsinki and us, as master students were called to investigate and make some suggestions on how to tackle this issue. On the other hand, in Cyprus this age group seems to be the most neglected group by museums, as the latter mostly design their educational programs for elementary school students and not for secondary education. This issue will be examined further in the next chapter.

“

When you told us about this research, I said wow, what's that? Seems cool.

It was my choice to participate, I could say 'no' I don't want to be part of this.

Natalia, Co-researcher

Since I was not in Cyprus during the first stage of my research I decided to make an open call for participants through Facebook. I created a secret group on Facebook and invited teenagers which I already knew through my sister, since they might have been interested in participating in the research. It would be easier to conduct my research with a small group of maximum 8 participants. Knowing that some of the invited teenagers might refuse to participate, I decided to invite more than 8 people. Hence, I initially asked thirteen people to join the research group, eight boys and five girls. The girls responded immediately and positively. On the other hand, the boys did not react to the call either negatively or positively, with the exception of two of them which expressed their willingness to join the research group. Thus, the final composition of the group was two boys and five girls: Aggelos, Alik, Christos, Natalia, Nefeli, Olga and Rianella.

The target group's age allowed me to communicate and coordinate the research project from a distance as well, since all of us were active and regular social network users. Another factor which aided the group's communication and synchronization, was the similar schedule routine of my co-researchers. They were all students of a public high school and six of them were also in the same school. Therefore, apart from various afternoon classes which are especially common for high schoolers in Cyprus all the participants were sharing the same timetable and school curriculum.

A final point which is further analyzed in the paper is the fact that all the participants have received the same art education under the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture's curriculum. This element gave me the possibility to examine, through the stories of my co-researchers, the flexibility of the art curriculum, of the school administration, and how different art professors approach their topic in Cyprus.

2.2.2 FLEXIBLE RESEARCH PROJECT

Since I was not alone and the whole research process was relying on participation and had a collaborative structure, flexibility was one of the main characteristics of the project. Flexibility is something that McIntyre (2008) draws attention to as well:

Yet in whatever context a PAR project is played out, it is my experience that practitioners and participants must remain flexible, open to redefining the meaning of "participation" as the process evolves, and willing to integrate the unexpected if they want to maintain and sustain the research process. (p.25)

With the term flexibility, I am not only referring to the project in terms of scheduling, but mainly to communication mediums and research methods that emerged during the research process. The flexible and collaborative process also framed and determined the context and the focus points of the project. For instance, due to my co-researchers' particular interest in the contemporary art museum, our conversations and questions centered around the field of contemporary art, in relation to school, museum, or their personal interpretations. Therefore, the thesis investigates the research questions mainly through the discussion of contemporary art issues.

2.3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND THEIR ONLINE EXPANSION

The internet and the social media had a special impact on and provided different perspectives and developmental opportunities to the project. Social media and specifically Facebook was the main communication platform of the group, and thus the main platform for the empirical data collection. The first and the last part of the research was conducted entirely through Facebook, due to the physical distance we had as a group. The other half of the project was conducted with physical meetings and activities with participants, but Facebook remained the main tool for scheduling arrangements, for communication and as the platform for sharing our findings.

Facebook livestream and Facebook polls were also widely used in our group's communication. Livestream was privately used in our Facebook group as an alternative to the videocall. With this method we could document our discussion and share it with the participants who couldn't attend the meeting session. Of course, the use of livestream was dedicated to smaller-scale meetings which did not require the participants' direct response, hence was mainly used for the presentation of new tasks or for the meetings' conclusions. Similarly, the polls' option helped the group to decide democratically over minor and major issues regarding the project; polls were used for quick decision making and the meetings' scheduling. Surprisingly, physical meetings were not very popular even when all the participants were in Cyprus within a 5km radius.

In this case, when a participant was not able to be physically present at the meeting, we were livestreaming the outcomes of our discussion in our private Facebook group. An advantage of livestream is the automatic documentation of the research process and the possibility of recalling the discussions, while at the same time it enables the active participation of the participants and their reactions through written comments. In ART INSIDE/IN RELATION TO/OUTSIDE OF THE MUSEUM: A GAME PROTOTYPE chapter I present how Facebook also contributed to the 'action' part of this participatory action research.

2.3.1. INSTAGRAM: AN UNINTENTIONAL PHOTO-DOCUMENTATION

At the beginning of the research project, I introduced to my co-researchers the Participatory Action Research as our main research method. Although I intended to include visual methodologies -such as photo-elicitation and photo-documentation- I decided to present only one method per meeting. Interestingly, photo-documentation emerged unintentionally from my research partners who decided to photograph their museum visit in order to ‘update’ their Instagram materials. Photo-documentation is a method which considers photographs as accurate records of the subject under examination and provides data in order to be analyzed by the researcher. Of course, at that time they were not aware of their action as a research method, but the habit of documenting and sharing on Instagram placed this method spontaneously into the project. The data of photo-documentation is extensively presented on the subchapter 5.3. PHOTO/VIDEO DOCUMENTATION.

2.3.2. FACEBOOK PICTURE POSTS FOR PHOTO ELICITATION

The photo-elicitation method along with its data will be presented in the chapter Contemporary Art & Museum, but I examine here how Facebook was used as a medium for said method. Facebook in this case was the space where the images of photo-elicitation were collected, and it ensured an easily accessible and well-organised interface for the photo-elicitation interview. The way in which Facebook image posting and photo album creation function were practically ideal for this purpose. The photos were chosen directly from the participants, and on each uploaded photo the interviewee could easily write a caption. Entitle the pictures in the photo-elicitation means that “the participant begins to reflect on the process of taking photographs in a way that then enriches the subsequent interview” (Blinn and Harrist, as cited in Rose, 2016, p. 321).

2.4. RESEARCH'S ETHICAL CONCERNS

Every research has ethical issues that it has to deal with, especially when the research involves people other than adults. The following section discusses the research's ethical practicalities.

The fact that participants were already familiar with the researcher was both a benefit and a disadvantage. On the one hand, it was easier to approach them and it did not take time to get to know each other in the group. On the other hand, the fact that they were already familiar with the researcher could also have been creating a feeling of commitment towards the researcher. In this case, it would probably be difficult for them to refuse to participate in the first place or quit the research project. Therefore, I aimed to reduce the possible feeling of duty by focusing on the research and downplaying our personal relation.

Secondly, since the participants were underage, the parents' or legal guardians' permission was legally required. They had to be given a written notice describing the project.

2.4.1. PUBLICATION AND ANONYMITY

Since the research contains visual representations which include photos taken by the participants, according to Barker and Smith (2012) they are the copyright owners of these photos and thus, their consent is needed for any reproduction of this material (as cited in Rose, 2016, p.368). Ergo, each of their photos included in this book - either taken by them or having their faces – is only used with their permission. For the final thesis book as well as for the public presentation of the research all participants and their parents gave their consent.

Anonymity was another ethical issue which my co-researchers ignored. I presume the topic of the research project and the absent of sensitive data was the reason why my co-researchers selected to be presented in this work with their names or Instagram names.

2.4.2. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN PAR

Alice McIntyre in her book “Participatory Action Research” sets 9 ethical principles for this research methodology:

1. Participants engage in *all* aspects of the project.
2. Practitioners have an appreciation of the capacity for individuals to work together to effect change.
3. Practitioners participate *with* participants in the overall PAR *process*, contributing resources and knowledge when necessary.
4. Attention is given to reducing barriers between participants and practitioners of participatory action research. That includes co-construction of consent procedures, documentation of data, and ensuring that the language used in the research project is understood by participants.
5. Participants are encouraged to learn about research methods that are appropriate to the project.
6. Practitioners make a distinction between professional ethical consideration and contextually specific ethical considerations, which can be negotiated and modified to best serve the participants.
7. Practitioners take every precaution to protect the confidentiality, privacy, and identity of participants.
8. Practitioners do not disseminate any research data without the explicit consent of those involved.
9. Practitioners are trustworthy; scrupulous in their efforts to give primacy to participants’ goals; responsible for the well-being of all involved; fair, just, and willing to relinquish their agendas if they conflict with participants’ desires.

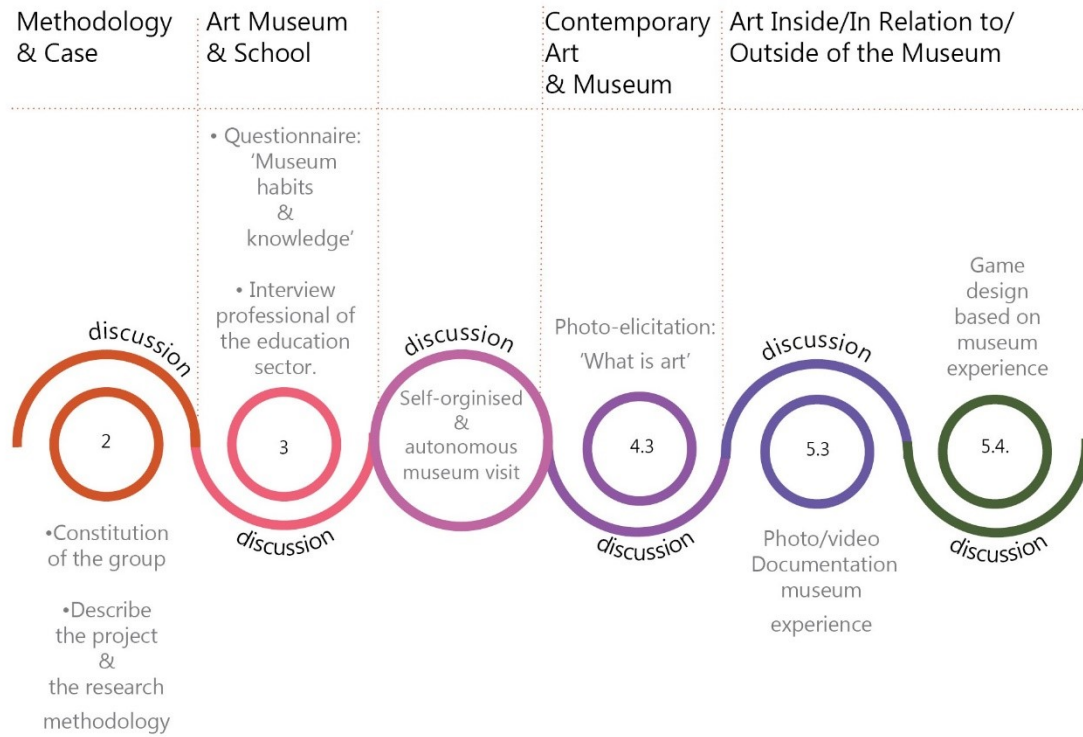
(McIntyre, 2008, p.12)

During the whole process of working for the thesis I tried to follow these ethical guidelines. Some of these guidelines were already discussed in the current chapter and others will be discussed in the following chapters.

2.5. RESEARCH DATA

The critical examination of art and museum experiences of high-school students, based on the gathered empirical material, is the primary aim of this thesis. The research data is mainly empirical, gathered through the participatory research group's discussions, the photo-elicitation method, a questionnaire, and an interview with Despo Pasia, a professional of the education sector. The empirical data has a decisive role in the evolution of the thesis' chapters and the final theoretical selections. Gathering and using the empirical data means leaving aside any assumptions and focusing on the facts emerging out of the specific data sample. I seek to keep the impact of the empirical data visible in the thesis writing by including direct quotes from our group conversation, collocated with the analysis and the relevant theory. The research data consists of 7 hours of voice recordings and private Facebook live streams from 8 meetings with my co-researchers, and of 1 hour-long recorded interview from a museum educator, all taken during the period October 2017 and January 2018. In addition to the recordings, the research data includes 1 questionnaire answered by my co-researchers and visual materials from their social media posts, as well as print screens from our private Facebook group. The aforementioned material is discussed throughout the thesis employed in a dialogue with the theory towards the investigation of the research questions.

The following timeline graph shows the different data collection methods and main research stages as they appear in the chapters of this study.



Related chapter or subchapter

Discussion: Physical or online group meetings

3. ART MUSEUM & SCHOOL

“ In general, the system of education makes us dislike “culture”,
I don’t know. They will take us to a museum and they will be bored.
And if the others are bored you can’t enjoy the visit,
you will get bored as well
Rianella, Co-researcher

This chapter investigates the museum habits of the research group participants in relation to their school's schedule and curriculum. Why does or should a teenager choose to visit a museum? Does the school encourage a teenager to visit an art museum; does the museum itself attract the teenager to visit it, and if so, why and how? In order to formulate a more comprehensive framework of such considerations, I discussed them with a relevant professional, an elementary school teacher and museum educator who shared her experiences and opinions regarding the art and museum education in Cyprus.

After the constitution of the group and our first online meeting, where the project was described and the research methodology explained, the participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire. The aim of this questionnaire was to collect data regarding the participants' museum habits and museum knowledge. The method of sending an individual questionnaire for each participant to complete was chosen in order to avoid asking these questions in a group discussion, as there the answers of some could have been affected from hearing the responses of others. Based on their answers, we continued our discussion in an online meeting by analyzing together their museum and art education experiences.

3.1. THE SCHOOL AS MUSEUM MEDIATOR

The main outcome of the questionnaire was that the participants mostly visit museums in the context of school visits. In the question “With whom do you usually visit a museum in Cyprus?” five of the participants answered “with school and family”, while the other two participants answered that they only visit museums in Cyprus with their school. In our discussion though, what came up was that participants rarely visit museums in Cyprus, neither with their school and especially not with their parents. However, they do visit museums abroad with their families when they are on holidays. The predominance of this cultural touristic activity was also evident from their ability to name different visited museums mainly within Europe, while in contrary they could name very few art museums in their own country.

The Leventis Gallery, which is a private art collection, was the most mentioned museum in the questionnaire answers. The Cyprus Folk Art museum and the Museum of Byzantine Art were second, while none mentioned contemporary art institutions such as The State Gallery of Contemporary Art or NiMac – Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre, associated with the Pierides Foundation. Analyzing the outcomes of the questionnaire in our meeting, we attributed the popularity of the private Leventis Gallery on its effective promotion, while the Folk Art and Byzantine Art museums are mainly known to my co-researchers because of their location just opposite of their school. I did not expect to read a huge list of Cyprus art museums in the questionnaire; nevertheless, I was disappointed by the unfamiliarity of the participants with Cypriot contemporary art museums.

Given that the Cypriot school curriculum contains ten years of obligatory art education – six years in elementary school and four years in High School – I believe there is time to invest in the experiential learning which a museum visit could offer.

The places that we call concert halls, art museums, and theaters are places that are dedicated to experience; they are venues for creating the conditions in which we experience a certain quality of life, a quality generated both by the features of the object or event we pay attention to and by what we bring to it, not least of these being the kind of attitude we possess as we search its countenance.
(Eisner 2002, p.207-208)

Thus, museum experience as presented by Eisner can be beneficial for schools' art education. Schools can take the advantage of the offered time and develop a meaningful long-term museum/art educational activity, giving their students the opportunity to engage with art.

While this small sample of high school students does not allow one to draw broad conclusions regarding the museum habits and museum education of Cypriot teenagers, it appears that as a society we cannot rely on parents to instill museum appreciation in their children but must instead instill it through the schools and the museums themselves.

“ I know many people of my age who engage in the arts as a hobby, but none of them goes to a museum. Ah, actually I know A., who visits museums with her mum. Because her mother loves museums.”

Nefeli, Co-researcher

“ No, museums not so often, but I go to the theater, because my mother goes. I get used to it and I like to go there.”

Natalia, Co-researcher

A decisive starting point for encouraging the cooperation of schools and museums in cultivating museum appreciation in students is the acknowledgment of the need for such a cooperation from the highest relevant authorities such as the Ministry of Education and Culture. Such an acknowledgment could ‘formalize’ this need and open the way for meeting it systemically.

The study curriculum for the Visual Arts (“Programs of Studies, Fine Arts”, 2009) developed by the Curriculum Development Unit (C.D.U.) of the Pedagogical Institution of Cyprus’ Ministry of Education and Culture, suggests three thematic axes regarding the teaching of art in schools:

Axis 1: Visual Expression and Thinking

Axis 2: Visual Creation and Sustainable Development

Axis 3: Cultural Heritage and Visual Creation.

According to the study curriculum, the first thematic axis incorporates basic concepts related to the visual arts and is considered the core axis for the study of art in schools. Regarding axes 2 and 3, it is up to the educator to decide how to include them in the programme of study.

The axis relevant to this chapter is Axis 3 “Cultural Heritage and Visual Creation”. It aims at the integration of the wider national art scene into the study of art in schools. Indicatively, axis 3 suggests:

- Study and critical view of the local and world history of art and cultural heritage, and the evolution of society through the visual arts. Critical analysis of works of art.
- Acquaintance with the work of modern Cypriot artists, and integration of artists into the school environment.
- Study of the historical / social / natural / cultural context of the projects and research on their operation and evolution over time.
- Linking art to life and to the immediate environment/community. Visits to local museums, art exhibitions, cultural environment of the school and community (municipalities, workshops, shops, libraries, parks), online cultural sources.¹

(“Programs of Studies, Fine Arts”,2009)

The fact that these points are suggestions whose observation by art professors is not required makes it difficult for the professors to include them into the already tight time schedule of teaching art. Including them is especially difficult for the educational tier which this thesis examines, the first grade of high school, because at that tier art is only allocated 45 minutes per week.

Hence, school museum visits, are mainly a bonus and not a required activity. As my co-researchers mentioned and as I can claim as a former High School student, school museum visits often take place in a problematic context such as the semestrial field trips of the school.

¹ Original in Greek

3.2. MUSEUM VISITS ON FIELD TRIPS

- In general, the system of education makes us dislike “culture”, I don’t know. They will take us to a museum and they will be bored. And if the others are bored you can’t enjoy the visit, you will get bored as well.
- Yes, yes, and the professors will be like: “Silence, Silence” all the time.
- I never had a good time when they combine field trips with museum visits. Because everyone is in tension...
- For instance, we have been to a Limassol castle with my family and it was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. And then we went there with the school, and I just wanted to leave, I didn’t enjoy my visit at all.
- The professors are not showing that they are interested. They are walking and checking who is talking instead of looking at the museum and the surroundings, this is also disrespectful for such places.

The large number of students who are attending these school trips together often contributes in preventing the trip from being exciting and fruitful. It is really difficult to pinpoint who is to blame in these cases, since there is a whole range of circumstances which determine whether a visit is successful or not.

There are a number of factors which could have contributed to the negative aftertaste my co-researchers have of their school museum visits. One factor could have been the decision of the Ministry of Education to not include obligatory cultural visits in the art curriculum, thus precluding museum visits by smaller

groups of students which would have been more enjoyable. Another possible factor is the fact that professors took the role of “behavioral inspectors” rather than the role of educators during the visits. Or maybe the museum is partly to blame for accepting big groups and ends up unable to facilitate a meaningful visit. A final possible factor is the bad timing of the visits, as they occur during larger trips in which the students are looking forward to a full day off from school obligations and activities.

“

We will perceive it as an obligation. We will follow but...”

Rianella, Co-researcher

My discussion with the participants suggests that unsuccessful visits have a negative chain effect: they discourage students from re-visiting the museum in question, or even worse, they make students averse to museums in general.

Therefore, based on my research partners’ observations and experiences I conclude that schools and museums should not arrange a visit for the visit’s sake but should rather arrange a visit for a re-visit’s sake. What I mean is that what matters in school visits to museums is to convince the students that museum visits are worthwhile. Once a museum visit fulfills expectations or even better challenges the assumption of the ‘boring museum’, it is more likely that students will seek to repeat this experience.

Education means sustainability, a continuous process of learning and exploration, or, as Hooper-Greenhill pointed out, “lifelong learning, flexibility, resilience and self-realisation.” (2013, p.13). Educational mechanisms in the museum play an essential role for the visit’s sustainability and are a factor which could prompt the students or any visitor to revisit a museum, since the visit would offer more than a Google image search could.

“Repeat visitation is a good starting point. Presumably, if someone chooses to walk through your door more than once, they’re returning because of something meaningful they found in the room” (Simon,

2016, p.167). The value of *relevance* is tied to the sustained engagement of people with museums (Everett, 2009; Simon, 2016). The museum should try to create connections between itself and the broader society. Meaning-making should not only be a personal process of the visitor, but also a primary concern of the museum itself. “Museums must seek new ways to stay relevant, to attract and retain visitors, and to secure their position as important cultural institutions.” (Everett, 2009, p.8). A museum visit is indeed a special event, but it should not be separated and unlinked from society and the everyday life of the visitors. Actions such as Tate Exchange² aim to create learning situations inside, in relation to, and outside of the institution both conceptually and practically. Tate Exchange expands physically beyond exhibitions by using an online platform and various free to drop in events. Thus, even if the visitor is not visiting the museum’s exhibition, he/she can have access to the activities of the institution on a daily basis. These approaches do not imply changes in the content of the museum but instead are building new doors to institution’s walls (Simon, 2016). The museum should seek to meet the visitors by opening up for them, new doors and not merely expect the visitor to come from the same (probably unattractive) old door.

The same openness should be adopted from the institutions which are claiming an educational identity. Both schools and museums must reconsider their relationship with students and visitors respectively. They should draw both on their needs and strengths and invite them to be active agents in their own experience, rather than serving them as passive consumers (Simon, 2016, p.95) of the educational or cultural system. Such an approach would probably change the attitude of obligation that the students have towards these institutions. At the moment, students feel obliged to go to museums; they do not visit them out of their

² Tate Exchange is an experiment. A space for everyone to collaborate, test ideas and discover new perspectives on life, through art. Whether you are an observer, commentator, researcher, creator, hacker, tweeter or just curious, join artists and organisations to explore the issues of our time. Drop in for a talk, join the conversation, enjoy a chance encounter and learn something new. In our opening 2016-2017 season, our theme was “exchange”, shaped with the help of artist Tim Etchells. We welcomed 53 Tate Exchange Associates who explored the value of art to society through over 100 events in London and Liverpool. Retrieved from: <http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/tate-exchange>

own volition. The notion of “obligation” – which a co-researcher mentioned – appears in conversations on school subjects: it concerns things such as class attendance, homework, tests and exams. Obligation, in this case, denotes distance from the subject, and thus a lack of interest on the part of the student for recalling what she/he learned or experienced once the class, the test or the museum visit is over. For the system of education to be effective, students need to be motivated to learn and experience things, including museum visits; they should not merely feel obliged to do those things.

3.3. MINISTRY AND EDUCATOR INSIGHTS

Although I have been away from Cyprus for the last 6 years, looking from a distance at its cultural sphere, I have noticed increased activity in the cultural field. A lot of museums were founded, new museum educational programmes have appeared, more art departments were launched in the higher educational institutions, and the first Fine Art Bachelor Degree, of a state university and not from a private institution, will welcome its first students for the academic year 2018-19. As it was pointless to discuss the evolution of the museum educational programmes in Cyprus with my co-researchers because they are too young to be able to trace it, I contacted a professional of this sector, Despo Pasia. Her dual profession as elementary school teacher and part-time museum educator was probably ideal for approaching the dual educational schema of museum and school.

The 1-hour semi-structured interview with Despo was conducted via Skype. I introduced my research topic and she expressed her willingness to share her experiences and knowledge regarding museum and art education in Cyprus. The interview with Despo provided to the research a new perspective and a better understanding of the current situation of the educational and museum scene in Cyprus. Below I present the parts of the interview which are most relevant to the examination of said situation and also support my unfounded assumptions regarding museum education in Cyprus.

According to Despo, the increasing numbers of educational programmes in museums in Cyprus are not necessarily commensurate with the content quality they offer. As she said: “The fact that in the last few years an increased number of museum educational programmes have appeared does not mean that their content is comprehensive or that they at least have an educational goal.” The possible deficiency of museum educational programmes may be due to the lack of permanent education positions in the public museums. According to Despo, this has a negative effect on the long-term designing of educational programmes, and also on the potential of collaboration between schools and museums. Specifically, she mentioned that with the exception of two private museums in Cyprus, there are no museums with a permanent position of museum educator and thus, there are no plans for the long-term designing and sustaining of museum educational programmes.

In our conversation, Despo also highlighted the huge difference between elementary and secondary school museum education, a fact which was also confirmed through the Ministry’s website. The section dedicated to museum education lists fourteen running museum programmes of education for elementary schools for the period 2017-18 (“MUSEUM EDUCATION Programs Educational Programs”, n.d.). In contrast, only three museums seem to collaborate with secondary education (“Educational Material for Secondary Education, MUSEUM EDUCATION”, n.d.). Furthermore, for secondary schools the museum education plans are limited to working sheets and activity suggestions for the professor who accompanies the students. (“Subject: Information on Museum Education Programs for Secondary Education”, 2016), in contrast to the programmes meant for elementary schools which are executed by museum educators.

Despo points out that there exists a structural problem for both museums and secondary schools, which does not allow a long-term planning of school-museum collaboration. However, she is actively working on bridging these institutions by designing and conducting educational programmes which target the integration of museums into schools and vice versa.

At the moment, the conversation between museums or other cultural institutions and schools is not continuous and it happens usually twice a year. Although the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture has designed a promising programme regarding Art education and Museum education, which recognizes

and encourages interdisciplinarity, experiential and active learning, (“MUSEUM EDUCATION Programs Educational Programs”, n.d.), there are still shortcomings which prevent a fully functional and sustained integration of the museums into the educational system. Despo mentioned funding issues which often deter factor school visits to cultural institutions. Similar financial issues are mentioned at the report about the art curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 in the UK³ by Downing and Watson (2004). Specifically, apropos of the use of external resources to support the curriculum a teacher states: “It’s not that we don’t want to take the key stage 3 students. It’s just that if we do get any funding for visits, we tend to take the GCSE students instead. Head of department, randomly identified school” (as cited in Downing, D., & Watson, R., 2004, p.34).

Such selective methods for visits were also mentioned by my co-researchers. Selection in their case though was based either on school performance or on field of study. More specifically, three of them follow the natural science programme of study: Physics and Mathematics while the rest of the research participants follow the classical programme of study history and Ancient Greek. Although they all obligatorily attend art class as part of their basic curriculum, the students of the classical programme are selected more frequently to attend cultural events -theater, art museums etc. - with school. Likewise, high achievers are more likely to be invited to participate in out-of-class activities.

“

Just because we like physics or math, doesn’t mean we don’t want to follow art.”

Natalia, Co-researcher

This kind of responses made me wonder whether my research partners are equally keen on art museum visits outside of their school schedule or whether their complaints are connected with the injustice they feel for missing the opportunity to leave their school for few hours.

³ In the UK, key stage 4 refers to pupils aged between 14 and 16.

3.4. WOULD YOU SEEK TO VISIT AN ART MUSEUM IN CYPRUS? AND WHY?

The last part of the questionnaire sought to understand the interest of my co-researchers in art museum visiting by asking: “*Would you seek to visit an art museum in Cyprus? And why?*” Some of the participants chose to write their answer in English hence the original texts are listed below. The rest of the answers were translated from Greek to English.

- “ As citizens of Cyprus we should know about the art in Cyprus, plus many museums are interesting and I would like to visit them.
- “ Because I find how art evolved throughout the years in Cyprus fascinating. I like how the art was inspired by different cultures too (since the people exchanged goods with many different countries and many great powers controlled the island bringing their own customs and culture) but the people still found a way to create their own unique art pieces.
- “ Personally, I would like to visit as many museums I can. Hence, Cyprus’ museums are a good and easy opportunity to start with. Furthermore, I am curious and interested in all kinds of art. Without a question it is a great opportunity to engage in critical thinking. Museum visits are unforgettable experiences.
- “ Why not
- “ I find art very interesting with deep meaning
- “ Because museums in general are interesting
- “ Because it is interesting to look at art.

My research partners responded positively to the potential of visiting an art museum in their own country and some of them tried to support their opinion by elaborating further on their answers. In order to have a better understanding of their honest intentions, in our later discussion I raised the same question. The oral communication offered different insights on the topic which are almost contradictory to their aforementioned written positions.

- It is something that I would never think about.
- Yes, **I would never go alone to a museum.** Even though I like museums and art, you have to decide to go, to have a motivation.
- Yes, a **motivation**
- I also like museums, but **we don' t have time.**
- I don't think it is a matter of time. **You can find time for shopping, why don' t you find time for visiting a museum.**
- It is something we relate to **holidays.** We are going to museums when we are on holidays (abroad).
- **Most of the museums in Cyprus are religious or archeological.**
- **We don' t have enough museums in Cyprus.**
- No, we have.
- **Then their promotion is not effective.**

- When I heard about NiMAC I was impressed. **Do we really have this kind of institutions in Cyprus?**
- Yes, same here. I didn't know.
- Ah! We should go!
- You see, this research project was a good excuse, something which **let us know about different museums.** Probably, we will visit museums more frequently from now on.
- A good thing about the internet -and disturbing at the same time- is the **recommended events.** Since I searched for NiMAC, more "artistic/cultural" events pop up on my Facebook.
- Yes, that is true, same here!
- **And it is nice that we got informed.**

Part of our group discussion

20/11/2017

3.5. CONCLUSION

This chapter has enhanced our understanding of the student-museum relationship and highlighted the vital role of the school in forming this relationship. Although, the curriculum of the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture urges museum visits and focuses on the interdisciplinarity, the experiential and the active learning which the museum could offer, in practice, the limited resources and the busy study curriculum does not allow these activities to happen frequently. The combination of school trips with museum visits has a negative effect on the student-museum relation. The sense of the irrelevance of museum visits during school trips and the overcrowded visits they entail causes students to have a bad or boring museum experience. Furthermore, the ineffective promotion of the museums seems to be an additional reason for the low museum visit attendance of high-school students. My research partners are not even informed of the existence or of the activities of the (public) art institutions in their own city, and thus the expectations for a potential museum visit should be null.

4. CONTEMPORARY ART & MUSEUM

“

*Art does not decorate, it overturns.*⁴

It is written on our art classroom's board”

Aggelos, Co-researcher

⁴ On their classroom board is presented as Picasso's words, so I suppose is a simplified version of Picasso's “*painting is not done to decorate apartments. It's an instrument of War for attack and defense against the enemy.*” Pablo Picasso, Les Lettres françaises, 24/3/1943

This chapter is concerned with the visit of my research partners in NiMAC (Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre, associated with the Pierides Foundation) and focuses on their encounter with its contemporary art exhibits. I present how the museum supported the visit by curating the exhibition and how my co-researchers interpreted the contemporary art exhibits themselves. Through the experience of and insights from the visit and through the method of photo-elicitation I intend to explore with my research partners the term 'Contemporary Art' and come to a wider understanding of what can be included in the term 'art'.

4.1. A SELF-ORGANISED MUSEUM VISIT

At this stage of the research we sought to make an autonomous and self-organized museum visit. This meant that my co-researchers would break the norms of visiting a museum under the supervision of third parties (school or family museum visits) and organize their museum excursion on their own. The sole limitation I set was the type of museum to be visited. The study focuses on art museums and thus my research partners had to choose to visit one of the local art institutions (museums, galleries, art centers). They had expressed a preference in visiting a new museum, a museum which they hadn't visited already in the past, and NiMAC was one of these institutions. Even though 6 out of the 7 participants were students at the Pancyprrian Gymnasium which is located 150m away from NiMAC, none had visited NiMAC beforehand. Visiting NiMAC was also a good option for the students to visit for practical reasons. It was easily accessible to my group of participants since it is located in the historical city center of Nicosia, an area which is frequently used for their shopping activities and nights out, and also because it remains open until late in the evening⁵. For these reasons, the visit in NiMAC could be planned either after school or before their leisure activities in the city centre.

⁵ The adaptation of the museum into visitors' daily-life and schedules, could consider as a factor which makes the institution contemporary regardless the content of the museum (historical museum, national history museum, art museum etc.). Contemporary in that sense means the integration of the museum to the contemporary society by making it accessible to the people of its time.

Due to the participants' different individual afternoon schedules, the visits to NiMAC occurred in pairs or groups of three, within a period of 2 weeks. After all the participants had visited NiMAC, we arranged an online meeting in order to share, reflect upon and analyse their museum experience. Meanwhile, some of the participants shared their experiences by posting on Instagram photos and videos of their museum visit. This photo-sharing inter/activity will be discussed in the next chapter.

The exhibition at this time at NiMAC was part of the project *Terra Mediterranea: In Action*, which “aims at detecting, investigating and presenting the reflections of contemporary artists on today’s universal landscape of economic, political, religious, social, but also deeply existential crisis of identity, especially as viewed through “Mediterranean” eyes, from both a political and a poetic stance” (*Terra Mediterranea: In Action*, n.d.). Our group discussion had as a central reference point the content of the museum (contemporary art exhibits) and some thoughts regarding the museum experience itself, namely how the museum facilitated (or did not facilitate) the ‘reading’ (interpretation) of the contemporary artworks.

4.2. MORE MODERN ART: AN ATTEMPT TO FRAME THE 'CONTEMPORARY'

At this point, I think is important to note that only one student had previously visited a contemporary art museum or exhibition. Most importantly, it was the first time for all of them to visit a museum without an adult accompanying them – either a teacher or a family member. This means they had the freedom to organize their visit as they wanted, with no time limitations or enforced silence. It also implies their responsibility for the visit's quality which corresponds to their engagement with the artworks, as they had to choose what to see and how to process this visual information without further guidelines in addition to the ones provided by the institution (catalog, descriptive labels).

Before their visit to NiMAC, my co-researchers asked me what I meant by the term 'contemporary'. Since my aim was to analyze and clarify the term 'contemporary' through a group discussion after their visit and after they had empirical references to rely upon, I consciously chose to answer with “the safe, academic, and “supine neutrality” of the contemporary, which simply meant work by living artists” (Bishop, 2013, p.12).

Therefore, after their visit and their first comments about contemporary art, namely,

“
Weird. Beautifully weird art”

“
Weird exhibits, they made you feel uncomfortable”

“
They were really nice, but some of them make you feel bad”

we return to this burning question of what 'Contemporary' art is? Obviously, they were not satisfied with my previous answer (works by living artists) so they attempted to frame it differently.

I did not expect to get a clear definition, especially if we consider that the definition of the ‘Contemporary’ is still a topic under discussion in the academia. An example of this on-going process of defining the ‘contemporary’ and also a proof of the complexity of the term is the plethora of the answers on *the questionnaire on “The Contemporary”* (2009), sent by the October magazine to several critics and curators, in order to address this topic. Here I do not intend to challenge or argue what contemporary art is or is not; rather I am presenting how high-school students interpreted the term through viewing artworks presented and named by the museum as ‘contemporary’.

- Modern art
- More modern art
- Modern art? Is it the abstract?
- More experimental
- Thought provoking
- Art which requires from the viewer to see and understand by him/herself.
- Contemporary art is more of a personal issue, I have to look into myself to grasp the meaning, but at the same time it touches issues that concern everybody. Classical art doesn’t have anything to develop. This is it.

Although their answers were uncertain and sometimes accompanied with a question mark, we separated their answers in three categories which can help us to approach their understanding of ‘contemporary’: Periodization, Expressive Forms and Viewer Engagement.

4.2.1. PERIODIZATION

My co-researchers persisted using the term ‘modern’, which is the closest art period to our 21st century which they have been taught about in school. Thus, both the substitution of the term ‘contemporary’ by the term ‘modern’ as well as the addition of the word ‘more’ to the term ‘modern’ suggests the ‘contemporary’ as the period which follows the modern era. Although contemporary art has become a moving target in the western world (placed after the post-war, fall of communism etc.), and its periodization cannot accommodate global diversity since it is marked by different historical events around the world (Bishop, 2013), in my co-researchers’ eyes ‘contemporary’ is part of the last chapter of their school book and everything that comes after the period. More precisely, the last chapter of the current art book used in Cypriot high schools is entitled ‘The art of 20th Century’ and presents art movements such as Fauvism, Cubism and Expressionism and concludes with a short introduction to the “latest trends of 20th century’s art expressions” (Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, 2002, p.202) including ‘Happenings’, ‘Conceptual Art’ (as an art movement), and ‘Environmental Art’.

4.2.2 EXPRESSIVE FORMS

Unlike modern art (covered by the school art curriculum) which is limited to pictorial practices and its art movements which could be easily distinguished through their brush strokes or pallet colours, ‘contemporary’ art has blurred borders in students’ minds. The use of different mediums and techniques which appear alternative to what my co-researchers consider as classical art practices (drawing, painting, sculpture), is automatically translated by them to ‘experimental’ and thus, they consider the term ‘experimental’ a characteristic of the term ‘contemporary art’. In their visit in NiMac they viewed different works of art by various artists in a variety of expressive forms (video art, video installations, paintings, audio installation etc.), something which introduced them to the current art scene which is characterized by a plethora of practices and mediums.

4.2.3. VIEWER ENGAGEMENT

“

Enough of personal poems, benefitting those who create them much more than those who read them. Once and for all, enough of this closed, egoistic, and personal art.”

(Artaud, 2004 (1938), p.79)

Even though Artaud was writing back in 1938, my research partners detect these characteristics of ‘communicative’ art, which touches upon topical social issues, in artworks of 2017. Specifically, they claim (based on what they viewed in NiMAC) that contemporary art is not anymore, an internal conversation of the artist but instead represents topics which concern the viewer. My co-researchers also made a comparison between classical artworks and contemporary artworks where the former has, according to them, a determined meaning with no potential for further development from the viewers’ perspective.

It is remarkable how theoreticians’ questions/observations regarding contemporary art came up in the students’ comments. Indicatively, “the idea that artists might help us glimpse the contours of a project for rethinking our world” which Bishop (2013) believes “is one of the reasons why contemporary art continues to rouse such passionate interest and concern” (p.23) **was also identified by my research partners as the main reason** which made contemporary art relevant and interesting to them.

4.3. BUT WHAT IS ART, ANYWAY? FRAMING 'ART' VIA PHOTO-ELICITATION

According to Jagodzinski (1981), “what are considered to be "aesthetic" and artistic pursuits are conditioned by the network of social institutions which define "art" in a particular historical period” (p.28). In response to that, I aimed to explore how my co-researchers define "art" outside of institutional frameworks (museum and school). Developing a personal definition of "art" and defining what could be included in its spectrum might be helpful for widening the expectations of my co-researchers of what could be considered as contemporary art, avoiding the modernist and classical criteria which were cultivating through school curriculum.

If I asked for a definition of art directly with a question like “what art is?” or “what art means to you?”, I doubt that I would receive any answer from my co-researchers or even from myself. Thus, I have used the photo-elicitation method to facilitate this art definition process. As Douglas Harber (2002) notes, photo-elicitation “is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (p.13). It is a semi-visual method of photo taking and verbal reflection. I asked my research partners to take up to 10 pictures within two days with the following simple but ambiguous instruction: ‘Find and photograph ‘art’ in your daily life’. As aforementioned in the methodology chapter, the pictures of photo-elicitation were gathered in our Facebook group.

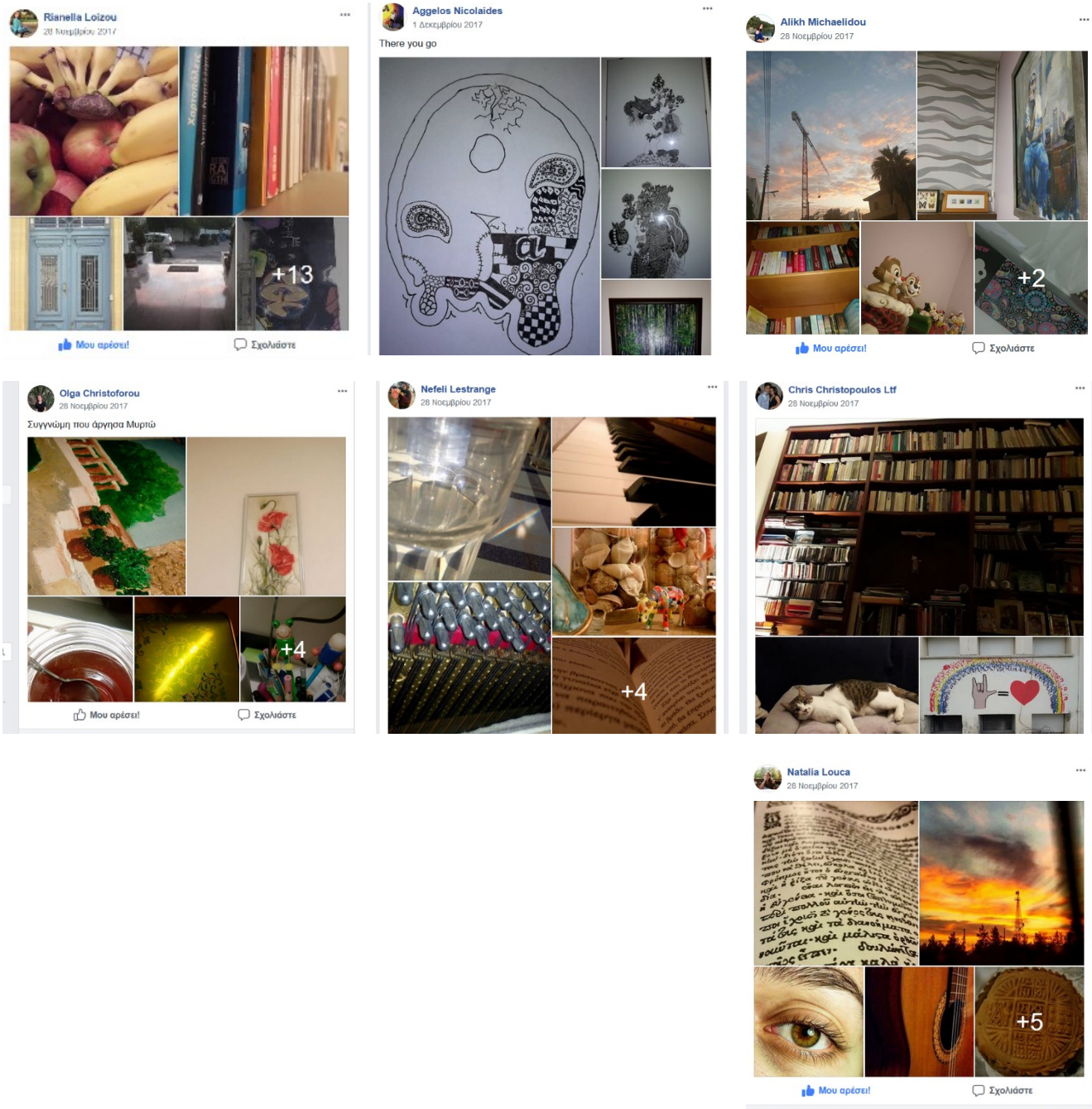


Figure 1-7. Photo-elicitation data, posted on Facebook

After gathering the data, we arranged an online group meeting to discuss our findings and we tried to address verbally “What art is?”. As I expected the photos provided rich material which initiated a fruitful discussion. The teenagers expressed interesting insights about the notion of art.

“

I was looking for something beautiful even though art is not always beautiful”

“

Something that does not have utility value”

“

A way of expression”

“

It makes you feel something”

“

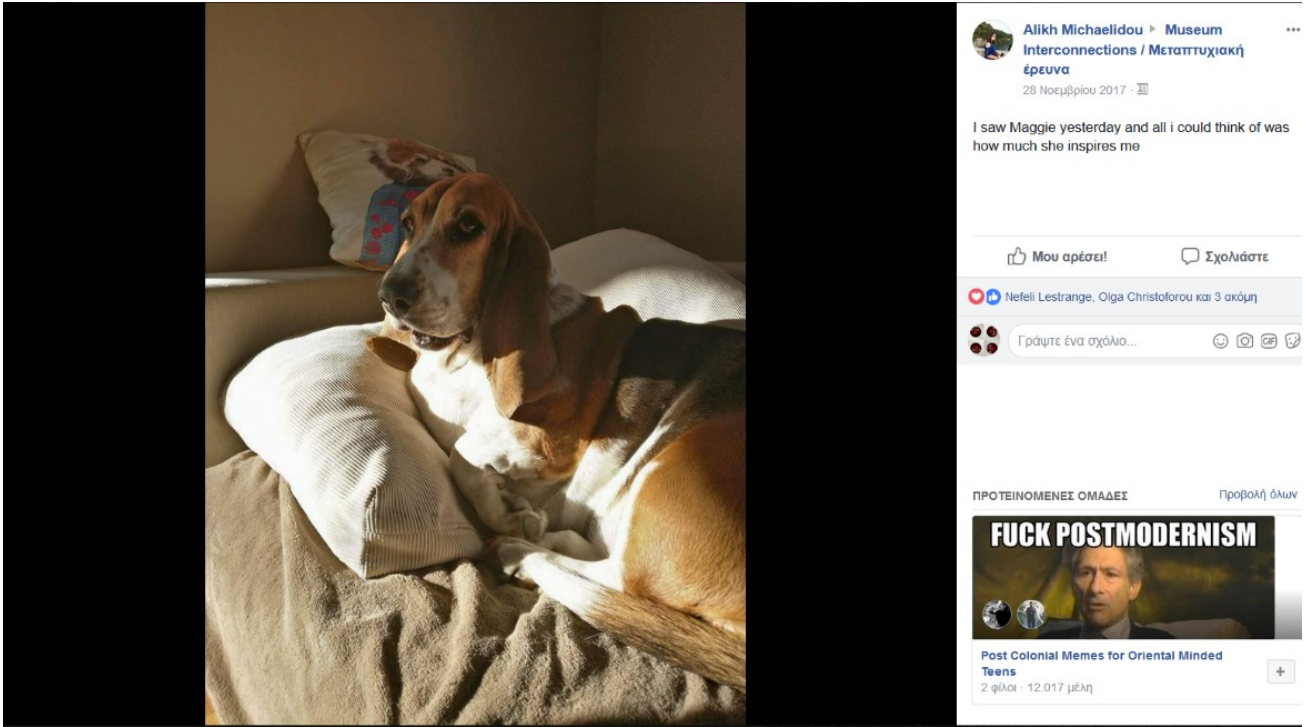
To admire it”

“

Glory, beauty”

“

I wanted to take a picture of people’s eyes or smiles but I was wondering if anybody would agree with me, if that could be considered art”



Figures 8-9. Sample pictures from photo-elicitation

After talking about their photographic intentions during the photo-elicitation task and what they sought to capture in order to represent "art", I tried to make an allusion to the institutionally -constructed "art" by asking them if any of the things they photographed could be included in a museum.

“

Not the photos as such, but the content of the photos maybe.”

“

The rainbow, probably yes. Find a way to create it, it will be spectacular.

The music instruments, yes. There are museums for music instruments.”

“

No, the dog shouldn't be placed in a museum.”

The discussion though had quickly changed direction after this comment:

“

You have to appreciate something not because it is in the museum, but because you perceive it as art.”

Subsequently, my co-researchers immediately rushed to set a definition of art, ‘depreciating’ the authority of the museum which ‘decides what art is and what is not’. In this case, my co-researchers deployed a sociological approach to the 'art', as is defined by Becker (1984):

No object has intrinsically ‘artistic’ qualities. Instead, sociologists tend to see the ‘artistic’ nature of an ‘artwork’ not as an intrinsic and inalienable property of the object, but rather as a label put onto it by certain interested parties, members of social groups whose interests are augmented by the object being defined as ‘art’.

(Becker, as cited in Inglis, 2005, p. 12)

What art is then? My co-researchers tried to provide a definition of art:

- For which art are you talking about? Art has many forms.
- Something which makes me think, feel, and something that is different for everyone.
- Art is a perspective, the way you choose to see the things. One might perceive it as art, another one not.
- Something which is made by a human, but then again nature is some sort of art.
- What people normally consider as art, basic forms: like painting, sculpture. How a person uses his/her creativity his/her skills to create something visual or audio.
- The first thought is a painting or things we generally see in a museum.

4.4. CONCLUSION

The chapter presents what 7 high-school students think that the notions "contemporary art" and "art" signify. The students' encounter with contemporary art exhibits and their surprise at what can be displayed in a museum proves that there exists a fixed assumption of what can be considered as art in general. "In an art world dominated by the modern (and to an extent classical) paradigm, contemporary art always runs the risk of being denied the status of art, because it is incompatible with the assumptions, standards and values of (modern) art." (Kaitavuori, 2016, p.205). Based on what they saw in the contemporary art centre, we set three categories through which to approach contemporary art: "periodization", "expressive forms" and "viewer engagement". Later we sought a definition of 'art' more generally via a photo-elicitation method. We aimed to reach a definition which would not exclude contemporary art, unlike classical and modern definitions of art which the students have been taught in school.

5. ART INSIDE/IN RELATION TO/OUTSIDE OF THE MUSEUM

A GAME PROTOTYPE

“

One may choose not to read the label and keep
his own interpretation as the 'real' one,
it is up to the viewer to decide.”

Aliki, Co-researcher

This chapter analyses my co-researchers' museum visit by focusing on their re(inter)actions⁶ inside the museum, and how these experiences develop and have significance outside the institution. Specifically, it discusses the photographic actions of the research participants in the museum and the process of interpreting an artwork. Based on the aforementioned re(inter)actions which my co-researchers had during their museum visit, we designed a prototype of a visitor-centered game which is presented in the last part of the chapter.

5.1. CONCEPTUAL RE(INTER)ACTION: INTERPRETING THE ARTWORKS

The first self-organized museum visit was both an exciting and a demanding process for the teenagers since it challenged their current museum habits (visiting museum with school or family) by being an autonomous visit with friends. Another factor which made the visit challenging was the students' encounter with new concepts such as contemporary art. The following quotations are a purposive sample of our discussion regarding the visit, focusing on how the curatorial elements helped (or did not help) their visual art experience, and on how the informal discussion between them during the visit aided them in grasping or developing 'meanings' and understanding/interpreting the contemporary exhibits.

“

For some artworks it was easier to follow the syllogisms and understand the concepts.”

“

Ok, art might be interpreted differently by everyone, but some of the artworks were a far cry from what we perceived.”

⁶ Re(inter)action: I needed a term to describe an action which happens 'automatically' (reaction), which later relates (interacts) either with the people involved in the reaction or by involving others.

“

If you don't spend time there, reading the descriptions, you won't understand what is happening.”

“

Most of the artworks were dedicated to immigrants and refugees, but when we moved to the next room, the topic was a different one, and so we had to change our mood. It was not easy.”

“

The wall descriptions for some artworks were too long, with useless details. They should keep them short.”

“

In a museum with more-Modern art such as NiMAC, I wouldn't like someone explaining to me what I see. On the other hand, at a classical art museum I would need somebody to guide me.”

“

I don't think we needed a guide tour.”

A discussion though? Do you need somebody to open up a discussion?

“

Yes, but anyway we were discussing when we were at the exhibition.”

“

Yes, just like we do with movies. Watching a film with friends and discussing it. I mean it is so annoying having someone explaining to you what happened in every scene, haha”

“

Older artworks have a historical background, but in contemporary art the topics are events which are mostly happening now -immigration, politics, environment, governments. Thus, it is easier to follow what is happening in the artwork.”

The last comment, draws upon the conceptualization of contemporary art, as it was framed from my partners, but also explains why a guided tour does not seem to be necessary according to my co-researchers. Although the participants persisted in moving on their own in the contemporary art center, they also admitted difficulty in ‘understanding’ some of the artworks. The descriptive labels aided the ‘reading’ of the artworks, but sometimes artworks could be interpreted or could initiate a conversation among my co-researchers on their own. As they said, the conversation (between the participants or ‘conversation’ as individual internal process, the process of analyzing the artwork) sparked up when the artwork was somehow relevant to them, if it was connected with something that they already had experienced, or, in other words, when the artwork was a “social object” (Engeström, 2005; Simon 2010). According to Simon (2010), “social objects are the engines of socially networked experiences, the content around which conversation happens” (p.127). Socially networked experiences which spark conversation and have an artwork as their visual stimulation might be connected with a primary personal experience of the viewer, or with secondary empirical data which a visitor happened to know (through others’ experiences, social media, TV or school subjects). In our case, as my research partners mentioned, the content of the exhibition in NiMAC was connected to the subjects shown in TV or shared in the social media, topics such as the Syrian civil war and the immigration wave.

However, as my research partners confirmed, these conversations around the social objectivity of the artworks did not always correspond to the ‘original’ content of the artwork, the content provided by the museum and the relevant descriptive label. Talking with others about an artwork which reminded one of something irrelevant to its ‘real meaning’, allowed my co-researchers to experience the infinite potential

for interpretation which an artwork allows for. Hermeneutic theory, specifically Gadamer (1997), aptly pinpoints artworks' infinitive potential for interpretation:

An artwork is never exhausted. It never becomes empty. No work of art addresses us always in the same way. The result is we must answer it differently each time we encounter it. Other susceptibilities, other attentiveness, other opennesses in ourselves permit that one, unique, single, and self-same unity of artistic assertion to generate an inexhaustible multiplicity of answers.

(Gadamer, 1997, p.44)

Nevanperä (2017) writes that “there is no end to interpretation” (p.136); I will add that the experience of my co-researchers in the museum shows that there is neither a (conscious) beginning to the interpretative process. Once an artwork is seen, an unconscious reaction of the viewer to this visual stimulus takes place, bringing together multiple events or a single one which the individual connects with the viewed artwork. This visual reaction (‘Reactive Interpretation’, see Figure 10) becomes a social interaction (‘Interactive Interpretation’, see Figure 10) when the viewer discusses the artwork with other viewers, when the visitor tries to recall and connect the artwork with the general topic of the exhibition or when the viewer reads the related label in order for his/her interpretation to meet the ‘intended’ meaning of the viewed artwork (‘In relation to’, see Figure 10).

‘Ambiguous’ artworks (the ones which could not be connected with the exhibition framework at a glance) were a topic for a longer and broader discussion among the research participants. As my co-researchers mentioned, these discussions often began with an ironic question, such as “what is this?!”. After their first impression, my co-researchers were trying collectively to reach an understanding of the viewed artwork, before they read (if they read) the curatorial label. As they mentioned:

“

One may choose not to read the label and keep his own interpretation as the ‘real’ one, it is up to the viewer to decide.”

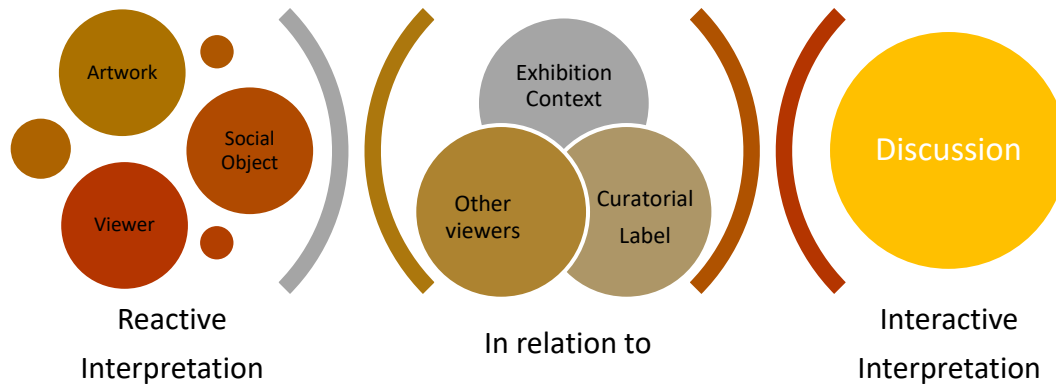


Figure 10. Conceptual re(inter)action

Our discussion regarding the forms of guidance in museums brought up the need for conversation rather than a passive and predetermined presentation of the artworks from a museum guide. Conversation is a practice which according to Emili Pethick “generates forms of exchange that are not fixed or static but rather sustain ongoing processes of engagement, responsiveness, and change” (Pethick, 2008, p.163). The conversation is always welcome among the visitors, who “are envisioned as active interpreters that selectively construct meaning based on their personal experiences, associations, biases, and sense of identity” (Stylianou-Lambert, 2010). However, a semi-structured discussion with art or museum professionals, might be beneficial as well. A form of conversational guidance would guarantee the active participation of the visitor, make him/her part of the construction of the artwork’s meaning, but at the same time, it would provide the essential historical or conceptual background of the work. Thus, it would have been an attempt “to respect equally both audience and object.” (Burnham and Kai-Kee, 2014, p. 59). As Burnham and Kai-Kee state, the insights of a professional of the sector (artist, art educator or museum educator) would ideally shape “an experience” out of the interpretation and make it possible for the viewers to leave the museum changed, perhaps transformed (p. 65). Likewise, I believe that a balanced conversation between viewer and professional could make the viewer appreciate the art as an expressive

form whose aesthetic activity and competence, as Aure (2006 as cited in Christensen-Scheel, 2013) pinpoints through the 'contemporary art didactics' concept, could prompt a relational field of communication and interaction.

5.2. VISUAL RE(INTER)ACTION: PHOTOGRAPHING IN THE MUSEUM

“

At the entrance there was a photography ban,
but it wasn't clear if it was for the flash or a general restriction.
Anyway, we took pictures.”

Olga, Co-researcher

In addition to the ‘conceptual’ work, i.e. to interpreting the museum artworks, my co-researchers conducted a material engagement with the museum and its exhibits. This occurred through their photographic actions during the museum visit.

Photographing in the museum is a topic which arouses my interest, as it is a spontaneous and widespread habit of museum visitors, but also one of the few visitor self-directed actions – “activities proceeding from museum visitor photography are not directed by the exhibition curators, but are instead by the audience” (Kiiler, 2016, p.174). My interest for this topic is based on a personal experience I had as an intern at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. One of my responsibilities during the internship was exhibition guarding. I spent a lot of time observing the visitors’ behavior and interactions within the museum. This observative position allowed me to acquire useful experience and raised many questions regarding the different layers of engagement in a museum. My attention during my ‘guarding duty’ was especially aroused by the widespread use of photography. I noticed that photography was sometimes preceding or even replacing the direct/physical gaze.

Although I wanted to include this topic in the research, I decided not to mention it to my co-researchers, since then it would not arise as a spontaneous museum visitor phenomenon. It was important to leave aside my empirical assumptions regarding photography in the museum and see whether my co-researchers would use their cameras to take pictures during their museum visit.

Unsurprisingly, photography was used by the research participants as a tool for documenting their museum visit and by extension as a research point for this study. My research partners documented their museum experience by taking both photos and videos. Their photographic actions were, as they explained later, part of their habit ('Reactive Snap', see Figure 11) of documenting and sharing their everyday life in social media, and more precisely, of sharing the visual material of their everyday life on their Instagram accounts. Such everyday photographic re(inter)actions are part of the 'like' game of social media. As my co-researchers mentioned, the museum ensures an artistic environment for capturing 'fancy' photos which later would guarantee more 'likes' or potentials for chat with other social media users ('In Relation', see Figure 11).

Photography, as Stylianou-Lambert (2016) discusses, is part of the "museum experience and provides just one layer of engagement." Stylianou-Lambert continues by clarifying that "using photographic equipment does not mean that other layers of engagement are not desirable or possible" (p.18). As shown previously in this chapter, photography is indeed just one layer of the museum experience, and in no way overshadows other layers, such as the aesthetic experience – "it makes you feel something when you encounter it" (retrieved from our group discussion)- or the interpretive process. In fact, in many cases museum photography can also contribute to the expansion of the museum experience, even after the end of the museum visit. As Kiiler (2012) concludes, "through networked social connections, art exhibitions can be integrated into cultural knowledge distribution." (p.181).

In regards to our case, some of the shared pictures raised up a conversation among the research participants and their classmates. Specifically, some of the participants mentioned that they have been asked about the shared pictures by some of their classmates ('Interactive Snap', see Figure 11). This kind of reactions can be beneficial for the promotion or the acknowledgement of the existence of the cultural institution. As previously discussed, NiMAC was an unknown institution to the high-school students of this research and as it came up, the same applied to their classmates. As my co-researchers described, the casual chat with their classmates did not extend to the content of the picture but rather focused on the place where the picture was taken - *I liked your picture, where did you take it? NiMAC? What is that? Where is that?* (This a representative example of a chat among a co-researcher who shared a picture on Instagram and a classmate who viewed it. This is not verbatim what they said but it shows the flow, the length and the value of their chat). Thus, a simple and daily habit of the research participants might be promotional for the museum. The photographic re(inter)action of the visitors begins inside the museum and spreads outside of the institution walls.

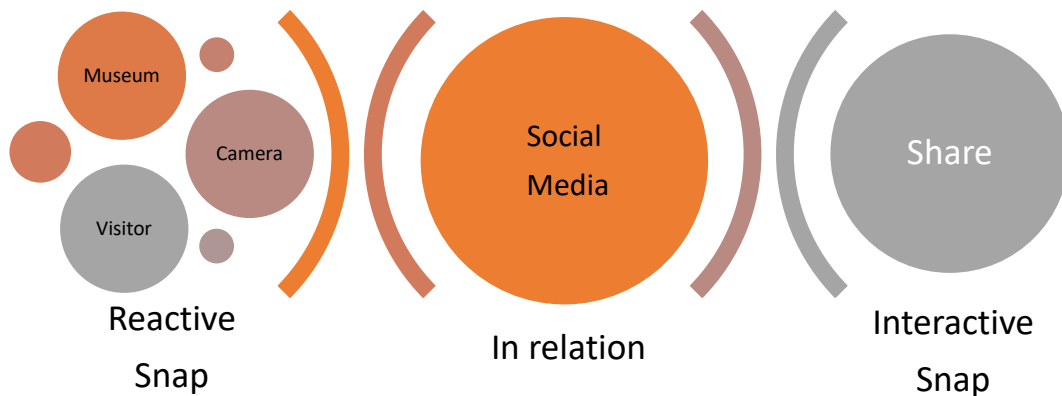
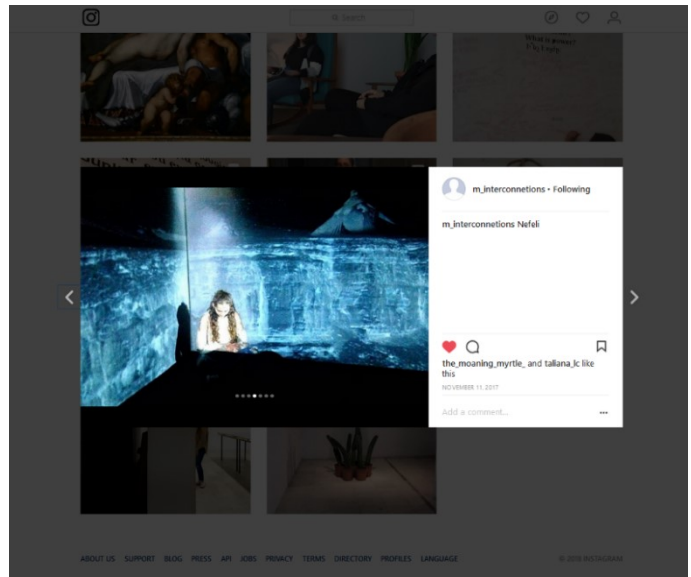
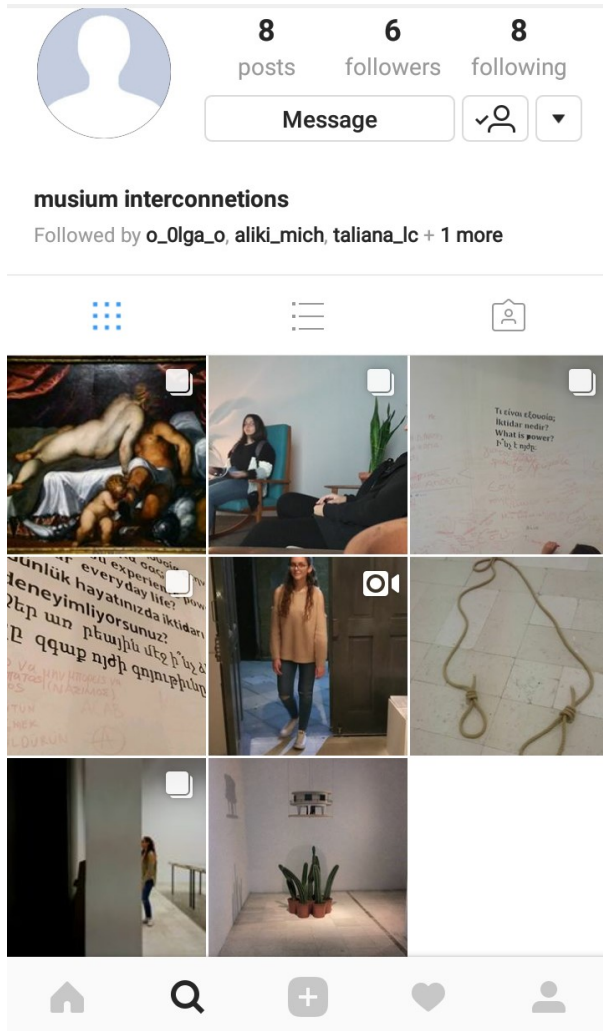


Figure 11. Visual re(inter)action

5.3. PHOTO/VIDEO DOCUMENTATION

My co-researchers, in addition to individual social media sharing of the photographs and videos captured in NiMAC on their private Instagram accounts, also created a group Instagram account (see Figure 6). This ‘group account’ was accessible to all of us (all the research participants could login to this account using their own devices) and we all had the possibility to document and share our museum experiences privately and solely for research purposes. Thus, a video and photo documentation method, as already discussed in the methodology chapter, had emerged in the study. My research partners used photo and video to document their museum experience - ‘a precise record of material reality’ (Rose, 2016, p.310). These photos were mainly of the artworks, but some were also of my research partners themselves in the museum and in relation to the artworks. Short videos were the main example of how students were moving in the museum and how they interacted with the artworks. We used this material in our discussions in order to recall the museum experience. The material was especially helpful for me (as I was not participating at the museum visit) as a tool by which to track my partners’ museum experience.

ART INSIDE/IN RELATION TO/OUTSIDE OF THE MUSEUM A GAME PROTOTYPE



Figures 12-13. Group Instagram account overview

ART INSIDE/IN RELATION TO/OUTSIDE OF THE MUSEUM A GAME PROTOTYPE



Figures 14-16. Individual Instagram accounts, visit in NiMAC

5.4. THE GAME: PERSONART STORIES

After the analysis of the aforementioned museum re(inter)action, (photography and interpretation process), we decided with my research partners to design a museum game and use our findings in it. This idea came up when we realized the endless interpretive possibilities the artworks provided and the imaginative stories which could be created in viewers' mind during the process of interpreting an artwork.

5.4.1. GAME RULES

The basic idea of the game is inspired by the Blue/Black Stories game, a card game where the players try to reconstruct an obscure event by asking, guessing and fiddling about. The basic difference (or adaptation) in our game is the addition of the artworks as a central reference point of the cards. Specifically, the artworks are the inspiration for the creation of the imaginary story which then the player aims to guess by asking yes or no questions.

5.4.2. THE PLAYER CONTRIBUTES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GAME

The game aims for the active involvement of the players and thus, the content of its cards, (photograph and story) is not a fixed collection but rather is an ongoing collection which is updated by the players themselves. Practically, we ask the contributors/players to use photos taken by them and which are portraying an artwork (not necessarily within a museum) and write a short (imaginary) story based on that photo and share their photo-story on a Facebook group dedicated to this game.

ART INSIDE/IN RELATION TO/OUTSIDE OF THE MUSEUM A GAME PROTOTYPE

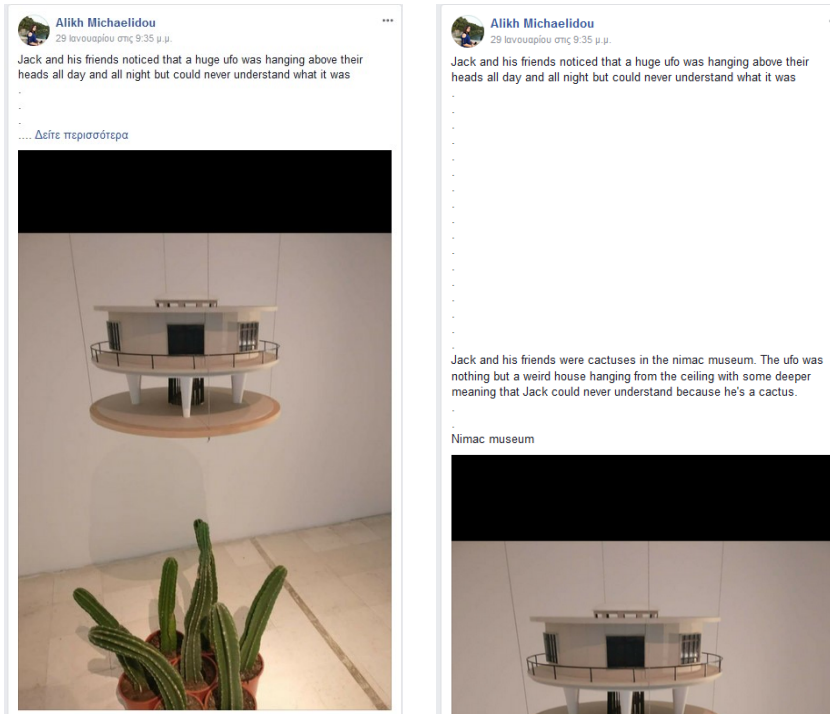


Figure 17. Research participant's photo-story



Figure 18. Research participant's photo-story

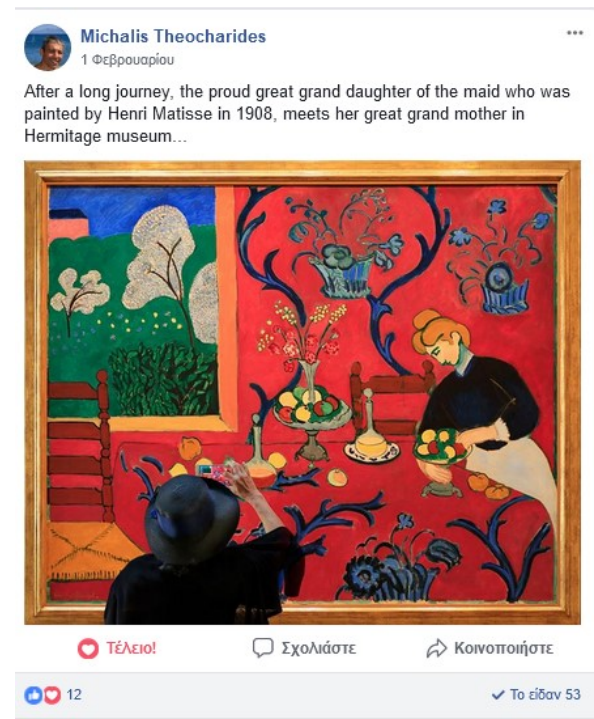
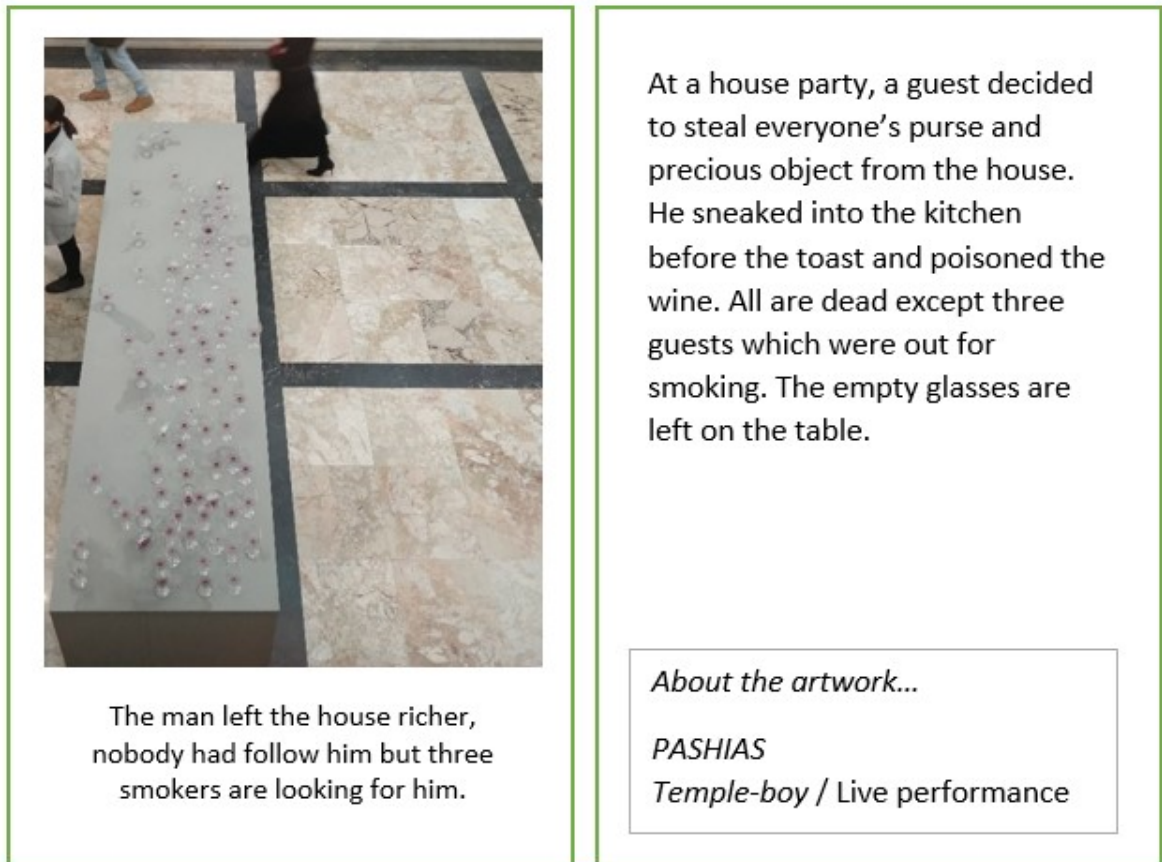


Figure 19. The first post of a photo-story from a non-research participant



Front side of
the card

Back side
of the card

Figure 20. Card layout. The front side includes the photo and a hint for the story.

The back side includes the rest of the imaginary story and the artwork details (name of the artwork, artist, expressive media)

5.5. MUSEUM PARTICIPATION: THE REAL GAME

The game is a proposed formula for a museum educational mechanism rather than a complete, ready-to-be played game. The game is based on and suggests the triptych of visual arts inside, in relation to and an outside of the museum. It is a general attempt to expand the museum experience outside of the institution walls by having visitors actively participate and being ‘responsible’ for this action of theirs.

“Does the game create connections between the players, or do they never feel a need to communicate with each other or talk about the game? How can you create and sustain a sense of fellow-feeling, of shared experience, of community in the game?”

(Costikyan, 2002, p.32)

Although Costikyan mainly refers to video games, the shared experience and sense of community were also mainsprings for creating our own experimental card game PersonArt Stories. Shared experience and a sense of community are issues which should also concern the museums. The lack of community sense in museums was something which arose during our discussion in the research group. The participants mentioned that nothing actually connects them with any museum, that they do not feel part of a museum community, and thus that ongoing participation at or visiting of these institutions does not constitute part of their interests. The participants have other activities in their daily life which according to them create this sense of community. Besides their interactivity, YouTube, Spotify, games such as League of Legends and Paladins (pc games which my co-researchers play regularly), various TV series, Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest, are all building up a community feeling which is acquiring an important place in users' daily conversations and lives.

Basing the game on the self-directed museum actions of the visitor, we believe that it will attract players such as museum visitors since it is highly relevant to their personal habits. By extension, the game could facilitate the sustained engagement of people with the arts and art museums. Simon (2016) dedicates a whole book to the power of relevance in a museum context and states: “We build relevance when we learn

about people and connect with them on their terms.” (Simon, 2016, p. 109). Thus, employing elements which were already familiar to students such as photo shooting, photo-sharing, and story-making, we aimed to create a personalized and participatory art game.

I do not aim to elaborate and test this game design in the context of this study and I do not claim that our game will have a huge impact on developing a sense of museum community. However, I and my co-researchers strongly believe that institutions like museums and schools have to develop similar mechanisms and approaches which rely on the experiences of the people they are meant to educate. Likewise, Salgado (2009) has four recommendations for the use of new media technologies in museums by highlighting the importance of community-centered design. Specifically, she proposes:

- ‘United we stand, divided we fall’ - To integrate practices to support and enrich participation.
- ‘Promoting and guiding community-created content’ - By promoting community-created content it is possible to create a more pluralistic museum experience.
- ‘Listen to and trust the community’ - Only by listening and trusting the community can we support community-created content in museums and
- ‘Stick your neck out’ - Support experimentation in museums because it allows identifying new and possible paths for designing interventions.

(pp. 122-128)

Similarly, in a more theoretical context, Lynch (2016), in addressing the museum as a public institution which supports and facilitates the development of people’s capabilities, wonders if through participation strategies museums may find themselves at the center of social and political transformation and if is “the time to re-consider participation in museum as a form of creative struggle that depends upon a (constantly) negotiated attempt at a consensus based on commonality and common interests” (p.33).

Likewise, as Bishop (2013) recognizes the sociopolitical status of museums which could “enable us to access a rich and diverse history, to question the present, and to realize a different future” and specifically refers to the potential of contemporary art museums to help us collectively to sense and understand (p. 62).

5.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter analyzed the museum experiences and re(inter)actions of my research partners. We specifically focused on visitor photography and the process of interpreting an artwork. I highlighted the importance of a visitor-centered museum approach and the sense of community which an ongoing museum participation could offer. The chapter concludes by proposing a visitor-centered game (prototype), designed by the research group, which draws upon the concepts of participation, self-expression and sense of community.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. PARTICIPATION

This study illustrates a rich understanding of high-school students' experiences in relation to the visual arts. The participatory methodology and the discussion-based approach adopted highlight the unique qualities of the students' engagement with visual arts inside, in relation to and outside of the school and museum. An important conclusion of this study is that the proximity between my co-researchers and myself, which was achieved through the participatory methodology, created a sense of community among the participants and promoted their active contribution to the research project. I sought to demonstrate the equal contribution of the research participants during the writing by directly quoting in the text their comments and ideas. The participatory aspect was deployed at all layers of the research, meaning that the data collection, the direction of the research and the analysis of the data were all shared with and discussed among the participants. The only part my co-researchers were not involved in is the writing process. I came up with the following Venn diagram which illustrates the different layers of this participatory action research:

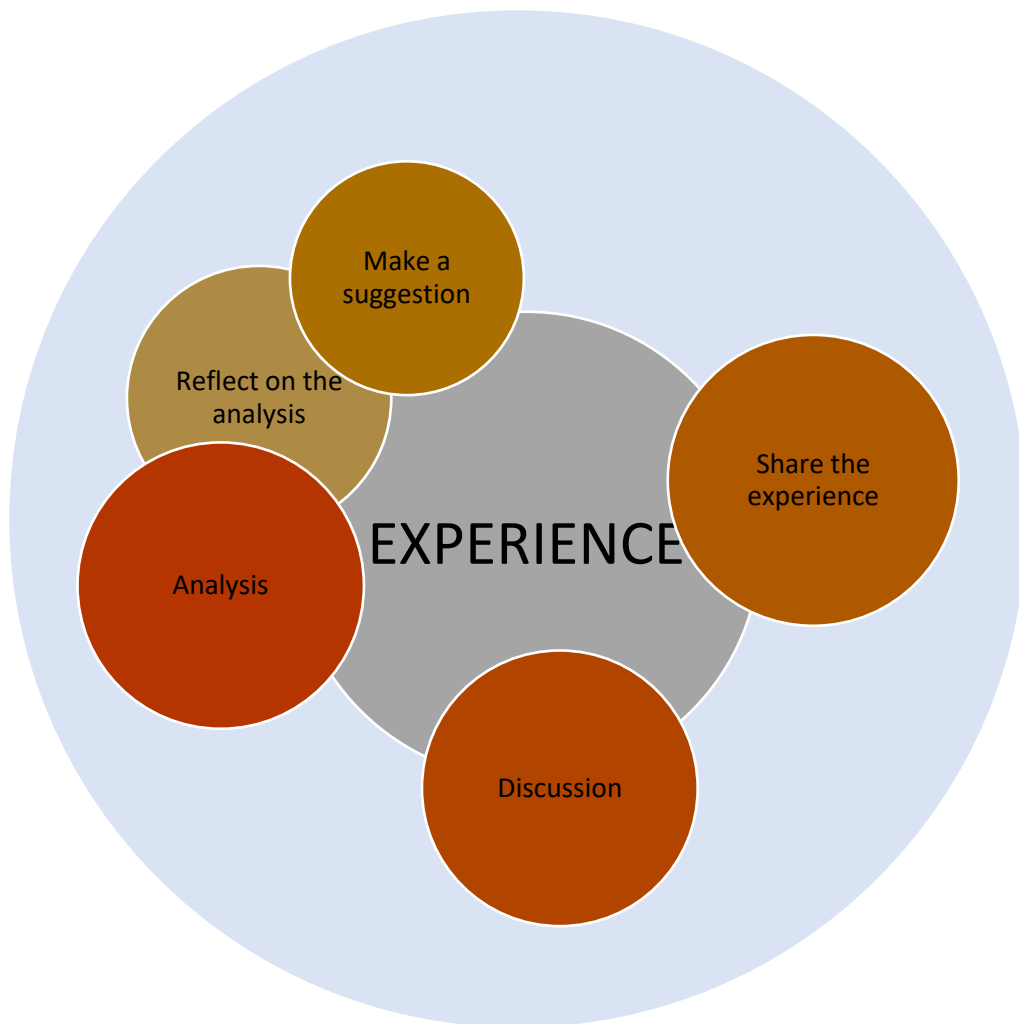


Figure 21. Layers of Participatory Action Research

‘Experience’ is the central reference point of the research and thus all the other actions (discussion, analysis, reflection, suggestion) rely on the empirical information that has been shared among participants.

The analysis alternates with the empirical data throughout the entire study and arose mainly through the group discussions, where the research participants brought together their stories and examined their various experiences (museum visit, art, contemporary art). The data analysis was mainly conducted at a participatory level and had a constructivist approach by taking into consideration the multiple realities of a sole action. Student identity was the connective link and a shared ground which offered the possibility to examine the research participants’ experiences in relation to the school and museum approaches addressed to this specific age group.

The analysis was one layer of the experience and it could take place anytime during the process, at an individual or a cooperative level. To wit, if the experience is shared (visiting a museum in pairs or in a group) then discussion, analysis and/or reflection could be happening simultaneously with the experience. The analysis was considered to be complete only once all the participants had shared their insights in the group discussion. Nevertheless, a meta-analysis layer was deployed during the writing process, which meant the connection with theory and the examination of the experiences from an institutional perspective (study curriculum, museum educational programmes, museum educator interview).

6.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order for the conclusion to be well-structured and follow the research questions set at the beginning of this study, I, repeat the questions:

- 1) How do high-school students experience visual arts inside, in relation to, and outside of the institutions (school and museum)?
- 2) How could these experiences inform the institutions (museum and school) in order to develop a sustained museum-student relationship?
- 3) What action(s) does our research group suggest to make art museums more relevant to the visitors by taking into consideration their visit experiences?

I do not analyze the already analyzed data but rather I deploy a more generalized approach to present some of the specific research outcomes, which are of course limited by the fact that they are based on only a small sample of seven adolescents.

6.3. EXPERIENCING CONTEMPORARY ART

My co-researchers were given a wide spectrum of choices from which to decide which art museum they wanted to visit. Thus, contemporary art was not a predetermined research objective; rather, it became part of the study due to the curiosity of my research partners to ‘meet’ the so-called ‘contemporary’.

6.3.1. INSIDE

School: The school curriculum does not cover the topic of ‘contemporary art’. Thus, the students were unaware of both the local and the global contemporary art scene and practices.

Museum: The visit in NiMAC can be considered as a positive art experience for the students of the research group. They were able to cope with contemporary artworks and discuss the exhibition’s topic. They also commented on the curatorial practices of the contemporary institution.

6.3.2. IN RELATION TO

If we accept that the notion of art has been and continues to be constructed by the institutions and the academy, then every action related to art is strictly tied to institutionalized frameworks. Correspondingly, in this research’s context, my partners had a strong perception of what could be called ‘art’ based on what they had been taught in school and based on what they had seen in their museum visits.

6.3.3. OUTSIDE

At a practical level, some of the participants were engaged in the visual arts, producing art themselves. However, the research question concerning how they experienced art outside the institutions was reported at a theoretical level and thus could be considered an idealistic or abstract approach. We thus pushed to approach the term “art” through our everyday life by decoupling the term from institutionalized art and deviating from ‘modern’ criteria. By doing so, the incorporation of contemporary art into the general notion of art was easier for my research partners.

6.4. INFORM INSTITUTIONS

Through the study my research partners raised different issues which could be used for the development of a sustained museum-student relationship. I will not go further into specific examples since they have been elaborated throughout the chapters but instead, I have prepared a generalized and perhaps banal list of ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ for the institutions, inspired by our group discussions and remarks of the research participants.

DON'T	DO	Discussed in the research
Wait for people to know you	Make sure that people know you	3.1., 3.4.
Rely on the sense of ‘visiting duty’ (Especially if you want to attract locals)	Persuade people of the importance of the visit	3.2.
Plan based your own preferences	‘Listen to’ the potential visitors	5
Monologuing while educating	Open up a discussion	5.1.
	Collaborate with schools (school proved to be the main facilitator of the student-local museum relationship)	3.1.

6.5. ACTIONS

The most important action of this study was the successful undertaking of an autonomous and self-organized museum visit by the 7 high school students who participated in the research. Such an action can be considered important not only because the students were informed about the local cultural institutions and visited one of them, but also because the participants informed their classmates/friends about these institutions.

The influence of this research on the participants is visible even after the completion of the study. Specifically, if we take into consideration that before the research visiting museums were not an attractive activity for the students, the fact that even after the completion of the research period some of my co-researchers visited the museum (NiMAC) several times can be considered as a significant outcome.

In relation to their museum experiences, students were able to reflect on their visit interactions and highlighted their visitor-directed actions in the museum (photography and interpretation). Seeing these actions as a form of participation and engagement with the museum and its exhibits, our research group implemented them into a game design, which can be considered to have a symbolic value and exalts the visitors' position in the art museum. The research does not suggest the conduction of the game per se, but rather, it suggests the implementation of its elements –participation, sense of community, and expansion outside of the institution walls – as essential for potential educational approaches either for school or for museums.

Finally, although we did not produce a final form of the game, we had some ideas for its potential development. We specifically suggest three different versions of the PersonArt Game:

- 1) Card game - a printed version
- 2) Mobile application - online cultural digital archive, upload the photo-story on the app
- 3) Museum activity - a play among visitors, creation of the photo-stories during the visit.

6.6. "I OPEN AT THE CLOSE"⁷

This thesis project was an exciting but demanding process and for me it definitely does not end here, with this conclusion. Rather, this thesis set the foundations of my future as an art/museum educator. This research made me a better listener (and reader) a skill which I believe is essential for one who wants to work with people, design for people, educate and be educated from people. For me, art and whatever is displayed in a museum does not concern only academics or museum experts but primarily should concern 'inexpert' people. Thus, by taking a step back from institutionalized or academic boxes and by discussing with my co-researchers a complex topic such as 'contemporary art', I demystified the topic of art and made it more approachable for both of us. Sometimes we search for the essence but we lose the sense. My researcher partners, with their honest and original perspectives, reminded me that both are equally important. I will seek to work with this participatory and constructivist approach in both my future academic and artistic projects since it turned up being influential and facilitating a rich and deep understanding of individuals' experiences.

⁷ "I open at the close" is a phrase retrieved from J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" and refers to the Resurrection Stone which was enclosed in the Golden Snitch and was only released (opened) before Harry Potter's death (close), giving him his life back.

Here, it has been used as an allegory for the 'hidden treasure' of this thesis, which appears after my reflection on the process overview. It has been used to state that "conclusion" does not necessarily mean "end".

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